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Tomás Luis de Victoria on the four hundredth anniversary of his death.

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The 20th August 2011 marks the quatercentenary of the death of one of the most significant composers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Spaniard Tomás Luis de Victoria, a composer whose music, while very much representing the spirit of its age, is as rewarding to sing today as it must have been in the sixteenth century. Victoria is very much a singers' composer: his music is beautifully crafted to suit the human voice, his phrases are never too long to sing in a single breath, his responses to the text are always stimulating. His only surviving music is sacred and sets many of the classic texts of the post-Tridentine Roman liturgy. He did not publish any secular music but the fact that he based some of his music on secular settings by his Roman contemporaries tells us that he was at least aware of the wealth of madrigals being composed in Italy during the twenty or so years he spent there and, perhaps more importantly, of the musical innovations which were being pioneered partly in the secular arena in these years.¹

Victoria was born in Avila in c. 1548, the walled city in Castile which at that time was also the home of St. Theresa. While the significance of this conjunction should not be overplayed, something of the saint's mystic devotion, as well as her singlemindedness, does manifest itself in Victoria. In listening to some of his most intense music it is the Bernini image of St. Theresa in Ecstasy from the Roman church of S. Maria della Vittoria which can come to mind, even if this was not sculpted until the 1640s. It was certainly early modern Rome which provided the most formative influences on the young Spanish composer: he came there in about 1565, most likely in order to study for the priesthood, and remained in the city until about 1585. It was in Rome that the bulk of his output was published and it was there that his spiritual and musical formation took place.² In turn he was to contribute much himself to the development of the new baroque Roman style in music.

In Rome, Victoria came into intimate contact with two of the great religious impulses of the time, those initiated by Ignatius Loyola and Philip Neri. The former was dead by the time Victoria arrived in the city but the German-Hungarian College in which the young composer enrolled had been entrusted to the new Jesuit order who regarded it as one of their most important institutions in the battle against Protestantism. Its primary purpose was the training of future German priests but it also hosted students from other countries like Victoria.³ Neri, on the other hand, was very much alive and active in the city when Victoria arrived and the young Spaniard must have early fallen under his spell, as did so many others. Victoria might have

¹ For example his setting of *Cum Beatus Ignatius* uses the opening of Giovanni P. da Palestrina's madrigal *Vestiva i colli* and the opening of *Versa est in luctum* is taken from Luca Marenzio's madrigal *Dolorosi martir*. See Noel O'Regan, 'Tomás L. de Victoria and Luca Marenzio: cross-fertilisation and emulation between two Rome-based composers in the shadow of Palestrina', (forthcoming).

² For information on Victoria's life and works see Robert Stevenson, 'Victoria, Tomás Luis de', *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 2001), idem., 'Tomàs Luis de Victoria: unique Spanish genius', *Inter-American Music Review*, 12 (1991), 1-100.

³ Thomas D. Culley, *A Study of the Musicians connected with the German College in Rome during the 17th Century and of their Activities in Northern Europe*, *Jesuits and Music*, I (Rome, Istituto Storico del Gesù, 1970).

been led to Neri by his fellow Spaniard, the papal castrato singer and early Oratorian father, Francisco Soto de Langa.⁴ Sometime after 1578 Victoria accepted a chaplaincy at the church of S. Gerolamo della Carità where he shared lodgings for a time with Philip Neri and with other like-minded priests in what had become a powerhouse of the devotional revival in Rome.⁵ Chaplains like Persiano Rosa and Buonsignore Cacciaguerra had stressed regular communion, penance, preaching and spiritual direction as means for reviving the spiritual life of the Roman church. Victoria had been ordained to the priesthood in 1575 and his taking up of the chaplaincy at S. Gerolamo speaks of his commitment to the priestly office and to the ethos of that establishment.

Philip Neri had started spiritual exercises with small groups of people in his room in S. Gerolamo in the 1550s and then, as numbers grew, they moved to a larger oratory in the same building, from which his movement got its name.⁶ In the 1570s he moved again, first to the oratory of S. Giovanni dei Fiorentini and then to his own church and oratory of S. Maria in Vallicella (also known as the Chiesa Nuova). Neri was particularly aware of the usefulness of music, both to refresh the spirit and to drive home the message of his sermons. He reintroduced the singing of *laude spirituali* in Italian, a medieval practice which had survived in his native Florence. While we have no direct evidence of Victoria's taking part in these oratory devotions it seems inconceivable that he would not have done. We know that, in the 1580s, both Neri and Victoria intended that the latter would join the Congregation of the Oratory but the composer returned to Spain to a prestigious position as chaplain to the dowager Empress Maria of Austria (sister to Philip II) and, though he did make some return voyages to Rome, he settled in Madrid for the last twenty or so years of his life.⁷

While in Rome, Victoria threw himself into confraternity life, at S. Gerolamo della Carità as well as at the two confraternities of Spanish residents in Rome, and possibly at others as well.⁸ There were significant numbers of Castilians and Aragonese in the city and both groups supported confraternities at their respective churches of S. Giacomo degli Spagnoli and S. Maria di Monserrato. Victoria worked first for the Aragonese, as organist and *cantor*, before returning to the Germano-Hungarian College as *moderator musicae*. There he was responsible for teaching music, both plainchant and polyphony to the seminarians and other students, as well as directing music at the associated church of S. Appolinare. This full-time musical post seems not to have suited him and he left it for the chaplaincy at S. Gerolamo

⁴ Soto and Victoria were both members of the Spanish Archconfraternity of the Most Holy Resurrection in the 1580s (see below). See Noel O'Regan, 'Victoria, Soto and the Spanish Archconfraternity of the Resurrection in Rome', *Early Music*, 22 (1994), 279-295.

⁵ Daniela Sorfaroli Camillocci, *I Devoti della carità: Le confraternite del Divino Amore nell'Italia de primo cinquecento* (Napoli, La Città del Sole, 2002).

⁶ For Neri's use of music in his spiritual exercises see Howard Smither, *A History of the Oratorio*, vol. 1 (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1977).

⁷ For a recently-discovered letter from Victoria in Spain to the Oratorian Giovanale Ancina in Rome in 1586, which he expresses his intention to return to Rome, see Daniele V. Filippi, *Tomás Luis de Victoria* (Palermo, L'Epos, 2008), 37-38.

⁸ O'Regan, 'Victoria, Soto'; Idem., 'Victoria's churches revisited', 'Tomás Luis de Victoria's Roman churches revisited', *Early Music* 28 (2000), 403-418. A Tomasso Victoria was a member and elected prior of the Roman Archconfraternity of S. Maria dell'Orazione e Morte which could have been the composer, though there was at least one other priest with the same name resident in the city at the time.

sometime after 1578; there is no evidence for his involvement in music at S. Gerolamo, though that cannot be ruled out. He then got involved in the Archconfraternity of the Most Holy Resurrection which, though based at S. Giacomo degli Spagnoli, was intended to serve all Spaniards in the city.⁹ It was something of a latecomer on the Roman confraternity scene, gaining papal approval only in 1579.

The church of S. Giacomo had a privileged position facing onto the Piazza Navona; the piazza was built into the ruins of the ancient Roman stadium of Domitian and provided a natural setting for processions which the Spanish exploited for reasons which were as much about political aggrandisement as religion. These processions included that on the church's patronal feast of St. James, that with the Blessed Sacrament during the octave of Corpus Christi and, most spectacularly, that held to celebrate the confraternity's own patronal feast of the Resurrection which took place very early on Easter Day. This, too, was a Blessed Sacrament procession, going right around the Piazza which was elaborately decorated with pageants, platforms for musicians and stands for fireworks. Music had a crucial role to play in all of these celebrations and we can be pretty sure that Victoria had a hand in them.¹⁰ We know that he organised the music on at least some occasions for the Corpus Christi procession. He also engaged in social work, acting as visitor of the sick and disbursing regular small sums of money to those in poor health and need.

For sacred music, 1565 - the most probable year of Victoria's arrival - was a particularly significant year in Rome. In the wake of the completion of the Council of Trent, which had made a rather vague pronouncement on music for the Mass in its final session of 1562-3, a commission of cardinals was set up by Pope Pius IV to make recommendations.¹¹ While it did not issue definitive guidelines, we know that it reauditioned the members of the papal choir, finding many of them inadequate in morals or vocally, or both, and dismissing them.¹² It also organised a try-out of a number of Masses for word-intelligibility though, again, we have a record only of the event, not of any recommendations which ensued or of the Mass settings tried out.¹³ But the city's musical community must have been in some ferment during this year, with choirmasters and organists unsure of their own positions and of the future direction of sacred music. In the event, things settled down quickly and the perceived faults of existing sacred music led to an unprecedented demand for new music. This demand was particularly the result of a realisation by all - Jesuits and Oratorians in particular, but also by the city's many and influential confraternities - that music had an important role to play in attracting people into the new baroque-style churches and oratories where, once in, they could be preached to and their behaviour influenced. A new vogue for multiple-choir (polychoral) music came about partly as a result of

⁹ Thomas J. Dandeleit, *Spanish Rome 1500-1700* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ O'Regan, 'Victoria, Soto'; Francesco Luisi, 'S. Giacomo degli Spagnoli e La Festa della Resurrezione in Piazza Navona', *La Cappella Musicale Nell'Italia della Controriforma: Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi nel IV Centenario di fondazione della Cappella musicale di S. Biagio di Cento, Cento, 13-15 ottobre 1989*, eds. Oscar Mischiati and Paolo Russo (Florence, Olschki, 1993), 75-103.

¹¹ Craig Monson, 'The Council of Trent Revisited', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 55 (2002), 1-37.

¹² Richard Sherr 'Competence and Incompetence in the Papal Choir in the Age of Palestrina,' *Early Music* 22 (1994), 606-629.

¹³ Lewis Lockwood ed., *Pope Marcellus mass: an authoritative score, backgrounds and sources, history and analysis, views and comments* (New York, Norton, 1975).

this, using surround-sound to embrace the congregation aurally and to represent something of the music of the heavenly hosts. Victoria, together with Palestrina and a handful of other composers of the early 1570s, pioneered this particular idiom, often associated in the popular mind with Venice but, in fact, as much a Roman phenomenon as a Venetian one. Victoria was the first in Rome to use two and three choirs for settings of Vespers psalms and was the first composer anywhere to publish music for three choirs (his setting of Ps. 1261, *Laetatus sum*, published in 1583).¹⁴

This was in fact more significant than just the development of a new style or idiom: it also marked a sea-change in the way composers approached sacred texts. Borrowing some techniques from the contemporary madrigal and chanson – especially the chordal declamation of particular phrases, as well as chromaticism and more jaunty rhythms – composers sought to match words and phrases with music which would conjure up aural images related to the words. There was a new flexibility, moving away from the seamless imitation of the first half of the sixteenth century, to a more adaptable idiom in which contrast between blocks of voices became important. Sacred music became more chordal but also began to exploit textural variety and contrast. This was the new style of the 1560s in sacred music, seen most notably perhaps in Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli* where, in order to make the words of the Gloria and Credo clear, the composer used constantly-changing permutations of voices, matching them to the text and highlighting the most important phrases with tuttis and repetition. In the following decade these permutations crystallised more, leading to music for two or more fixed groups which could bounce the words back and forth antiphonally, as well as combining in order to mark particular words and climaxes. All this increased the possibilities for word-setting and was embraced wholeheartedly by Victoria as well as by his Roman contemporaries. Victoria was more adventurous than the others in marking off contrasting sections for small groups of voices and large ones, anticipating something of the baroque love of contrast between groups.

Married to all this was an increased awareness of what we now call tonality. Music for multiple choirs relied on clean handovers between the choirs which, in turn, meant frequent cadences and bass parts which moved mainly in fourths and fifths. Victoria pioneered the use of the circle of fifths in this music, employing a series of harmonies whose bass notes were a fifth apart; this was to give greater direction to the harmony and was also to become the staple of baroque practice. Should Victoria then be labelled a renaissance or a baroque composer? In a sense he was both, moving between the two in response to the particular genre in which he was writing. His hymn settings and single-choir Magnificats are in the traditional manner, looking back to the music of his fellow countryman Cristóbal de Morales, while presenting a beautifully-crafted clarity. At the same time, with the publication of his eight-voice *Ave Maria* in 1572, Victoria ushered in many of we now see as baroque features, more so than can be found, for instance, in Palestrina's four eight-voice pieces published in that same year. Both composers quickly published full-scale *cori spezzati* pieces for separately-placed choirs in 1575 and 1576 respectively. Neither has traditionally been given sufficient credit for their part in setting the parameters of the baroque, probably because their music for multiple choirs has tended to be neglected.

¹⁴ Anthony F. Carver, *Cori Spezzati*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Another moot point is whether we should regard Victoria as a Roman or a Spanish composer, in so far as these labels are meaningful. Spanish musicologists have tended to stress the mystical character of his music, seen particularly in the Holy Week Responsories and in some of the motets. Victoria certainly brings a particularly sensitivity to the words and an ability to find an expressive musical language to illuminate them. Whether or not this is a Spanish trait, rather than one personal to Victoria, can be argued. His predecessors, Morales and Francisco Guerrero, have their own way of dealing with sacred texts which are, if anything, more mainstream. Victoria's successors on the Iberian peninsula absorbed something of his individual style and this has come to be associated with that region. In most respects Victoria fits clearly into musical developments in Rome. Whether or not he studied with Palestrina he certainly knew his music and the two composers followed a parallel line of development through the 1570s and 1580s, modifying the traditional elements of earlier styles in order to respond more flexibly to the text. In this respect Victoria and Luca Marenzio helped bridge the gap between Palestrina and an extensive younger generation of Rome-based composers who expanded on their work and carried their techniques into the seventeenth century.¹⁵ Another mentor for Victoria would have been the Florentine-born composer Giovanni Animuccia who moved to Rome and was active both at St. Peter's Basilica and in composing for the devotional gatherings of Philip Neri.

What then is Victoria's legacy to twentieth-century church choirs? Traditionally he has been most appreciated for his Holy Week Responsories, Reproaches and Passions; a few Masses (particularly the 1605 Requiem) and a (relatively) few motets. There are also a couple of probably spurious works which have been popular since the nineteenth century.¹⁶ This restricted list of regularly-performed music could easily be broadened to include a wider selection in all areas, particularly of his motets (in the broadest sense) and Masses. The former include texts appropriate for many of the important feasts of the church year; the Christmas motet *O magnum mysterium* is well-known but just as beautiful is *Surrexit pastor bonus* and *Ardens est cor meum* for Easter, *Ascendens Christus* for the Ascension and *Dum complerentur* for Pentecost. There are some wonderful motets for saints' days like *Doctor bonus* for St. Andrew, *Descendit angelus* for St. John the Baptist or *Tu es Petrus* for St. Peter. Victoria's settings of texts for the Virgin Mary are particularly inspired, including multiple settings of the four Marian antiphons, originally sung at the end of Vespers or Compline, but also suitable for general devotional use. There are four settings of the *Salve Regina*, for example: for five, six and eight voices, which between them would suit a variety of choral forces. His settings of texts from the Song of Songs are especially effective, for example *O quam pulchri sunt*, *Nigra sum* and the extended *Vadam et circuibo civitatem* and *Vidi speciosam*.

Many of Victoria's twenty Masses are relatively short, making them well-suited to today's liturgy; seven are based on his own motets or antiphon settings which could be sung alongside them. Three are large-scale polychoral settings based

¹⁵ This generation included composers like Felice and Giovanni Francesco Anerio, Ruggiero Giovanelli, Giovanni Bernardino Nanino, Asprilio Pacelli, Annibale Stabile and Francesco Soriano.

¹⁶ *Jesu dulcis memoria* and the four-voice *Ave Maria* did not appear in any of Victoria's publications nor do they survive in any manuscripts contemporary with the composer. They first appeared in the nineteenth century. Even if not by Victoria, they are both successful and popular works.

on his double-choir Marian antiphon settings and suitable for major feastday celebrations. There is even a battle Mass for double choir, based on Claude Jannquin's chanson *La Guerre*, where Victoria lets his hair down, as it were. While his large-scale polychoral Vespers psalm settings may not easily fit into today's vernacular liturgy, individual psalms could certainly be used as anthems. There is also a set of simple settings of the common Vespers psalms which alternate polyphony and plainsong. These survive in a Roman manuscript with corrections in the composer's hand; they seem to have been prepared for publication but not actually printed.¹⁷ These are particularly useful for less experienced singers.

While ideally suited to Cathedral choirs, much of Victoria's music is also within the reach of competent parish choirs. His pieces are not too long and the word-setting is usually transparent and almost always inspired. His harmony often feels more modern than that of his contemporaries, especially through his use of circles of fifths. His exploitation of two closely-intertwined soprano parts who exploit suspension dissonances and create high combination-tone harmonics is a particularly appealing feature, as in the well-known *O vos omnes*. Victoria was a constant reviser and honer of his music which he republished at regular intervals. The result is a carefully-crafted oeuvre in which no notes seem unnecessary. The frequency of his publications speaks partly of his marketing successes but must also be seen as a sign of his popularity in his day.¹⁸ Among the surviving inventories and archived payments for printed music in thirteen Roman institutions, for example, it is the publications of Victoria and those of Morales that dominate. This success was mirrored in Spain and into the New World. One of Victoria's major contributions was to act as a filterer of the late sixteenth-century Roman style to the Iberian peninsula and on into the New World where composers continued to imitate his style into the eighteenth century. Spain itself has come more into the European and world mainstream in the past thirty years. Spanish musicology has also come of age, with scholars breaking out of a rather restricted mould to explore the music of the peninsula in a broader social and cultural context. The growing significance of Latin America and of Hispanic communities worldwide means that Victoria can increasingly be seen as an international composer whose music can speak to all and which can unite the old and new worlds in a meaningful way.

Can Victoria's music speak to members of the Anglican Communion today? On the face of it he was the archetypal composer of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. He worked in Rome and in Spain and he was close to King Philip II to whom he dedicated a book of Masses in 1583. He returned to Madrid to the employment of Philip's sister just a few years before the Spanish Armada sailed for England. His music was known in English Catholic recusant circles during his lifetime, or shortly afterwards.¹⁹ At the same time Victoria's music has much in

¹⁷ Klaus Fischer, 'Unbekannte Kompositionen Victorias in der Biblioteca nazionale in Rom', *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, 32 (1975), 124–38.

¹⁸ Victoria was a keen marketer of his own publications, sending copies on approval to cathedrals and princes. See Stevenson, 'Tomás Luis de Victoria: unique Spanish genius'.

¹⁹ There are eight pieces by Victoria arranged for lute (and soprano voice, now missing) in the manuscript Tenbury 340 from c. 1615 now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, one of a series of manuscripts associated with the recusant English Catholic Edward Paston. See James L. Mitchell, *An Examination of Manuscript Tenbury 340 and a Critical Edition of Six Works from its Repertory* (Unpublished M.Mus dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1998).

common with that of Thomas Tallis and William Byrd, English composers who wrote for both Catholic and Protestant services in the same period. Leaving aside its confessional origins, Victoria's music has the ability to appeal right across the board due to its emotional intensity and utter faithfulness to the text. Attention to the text was something common to musicians in all of the emergent denominations in the sixteenth century. The Roman Catholic church retained Latin but, that apart, its composers had the same desire as those working for protestant congregations to reflect the words and to use their music for evangelical purposes. Major Roman reform figures such as Philip Neri were as conscious as many of their protestant contemporaries that music had a key role to play in attracting and converting people. Victoria's music, while written for that age, can still speak directly to today's congregations as well as to concert audiences. This year's quatercentenary will hopefully lead to new discoveries and new ways of appreciating the music of one of Spain's, and indeed the world's, great composers.